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Reviews

Personification: using the dialogical self in psychotherapy and counselling

John Rowan

Routledge 2009

ISBN 978-7415-433464 £19.99



Dr John Rowan does not just hate

academia, he also hates academics, because 'they are all about control'. Actually, he has strong feelings

about quite a lot of things. NLP (neuro-linguistic programming), for example, is, according to him, 'relentlessly adolescent and trivial'.

It comes as no surprise then, to discover that this is not an academic book, if that term is intended to convey a reasoned argument leading to conclusions that may be flawed, but are at least logical. Rowan's book is more of an impassioned plea to integrate psychotherapies, and for therapists to work more in the moment, with an emphasis on paying attention to the client's different (and warring) voices. These voices are collectively called 'the dialogical self'. Rowan has written on this topic previously, but his new understanding is that all these voices are equally valid – not sub-personalities, but personalities of equal worth.

In taking seriously this 'multiplicity of voices', Rowan posits that there are five stages to cure or change, from listening and accepting, through to coordination, integration and synthesis. Rowan also gives three rules for using his approach: spontaneity, listening and creativity. These strike me as good rules for any therapist, and perhaps add to

his argument for integration of therapies. These are ideas that give food for thought, although I was concerned that there is no mention made of the fact that sometimes, at the extreme end, these voices can be so powerful that disassociation (when one personality becomes so powerful that there may be an unknown gap in time for the normally-dominant personality) may, and can, occur.

The book is divided into three unequal parts, with an introduction that sets out the aims of the book: to question the idea of any absolute truth in psychotherapy, and to critique the literature on sub-personalities (with the 'secret' desire to influence current writers and thinkers on the subject of the dialogical self).

Part one serves as an introduction to the topic, and lays the groundwork for what will come next. It defines the dialogical self as 'the warring voices in our head'. Rowan's method is to quote extensively from writers he admires, as if because they say something, then it must be right. In order to do this, he goes as far back as Plato, and demonstrates an impressive knowledge of the subject. However, there are points when there are so many of these quotations that they begin to merge into a quasi biblical theme, full of begots and begats.

Part two, the main section, begins with a history of the use of multiplicity in therapy, and moves on to criticise many of the current therapies, without properly critiquing them. Given that this is a book whose expressed intent is to offer a theory that could integrate the different psychotherapies, it is a little surprising that Rowan allows himself to be quite so rude about so many of them. In just one chapter, for example, he says that Freud is questionable, Jung needs a new look, Perls has problems, Berne is over-simplified, there are difficulties with psychodrama, Shapiro is too fixed, NLP is insanely pragmatic, as well as relentlessly trivial and adolescent, and, by extension, Rowan alone is

right. Some of the people he is so contemptuous of were actually great thinkers of their day and their contributions deserve a more considered appraisal.

In this section, Rowan explains the 'serious research' behind this approach. I struggled to follow what he meant, as his research seemed to be based on single case studies (though from different therapists). Case studies are usually interesting, and can often help to bring to life a theoretical point, but there are inherent dangers in generalising from anecdotal evidence.

This part of the book also introduces the reader to a subject that Rowan is passionate about – reification. This means taking a theoretical concept (such as Freud's Id, Ego, and Superego) and treating it as if it is a real entity and therefore unchallengeable. Whilst I have long noticed this phenomenon I had not known that it had a name.

Again, this part includes very full quotations from other writers. There are simply too many of these. They interfere with the flow of the narrative, and take away from the experience of hearing Rowan's own original voice.

In the last, short section of the book, Rowan discusses the potential for working with the client's different voices. This, in some ways is the most pertinent, as well as the most interesting part of the book, as Rowan allows himself to discuss working transpersonally, or spiritually, and using this as a bridge to cross religious or cultural differences.

Dr Rowan is passionate about his beliefs but he allows no room for doubters – Perls is wrong (though on the right lines) Berne is wrong (though Clarkson gets close), everyone but those who accept his ideas are simply wrong. He does not so much try to convince the reader of the viability of his ideas, as to assume that he is right, and therefore others are wrong. I found this approach simply baffling. Broad assertions are not the same as argued points.

This is quite a short book, of 146 pages of text. However, it is not until chapter six that Rowan says that he has come to the 'real meat' of the book. More than halfway through seems quite a long wait for the meat. The starter should be a prelude to the main course, rather than equally substantial.

In conclusion, this is a book about an experience that, he says, cannot be named, that language will only distort and misrepresent, and in trying to do that, he has set himself an impossible task. It may be that this review, in using language as it does, also distorts and misrepresents. However, in the end, this is a book whose style comes across as hectoring and lecturing. Passion is a wonderful thing, but if it is also meant to educate and convince it may need to be tempered with reason.

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Jay Haley revisited
Madeleine Richeport-Haley, Jon Carlson (eds)
Routledge 2010
ISBN 978-0415805339 £22.50



Jay Haley revisited is a collection of 20 papers, written by Haley between 1958-2001. When I saw that one of the editors was Haley's wife, my first

reaction was to be a little dubious. Wives can view their spouse's writing through rose-tinted spectacles – and persuade others to – so I was pleased to see that each paper is introduced by a different colleague from the related fields of psychology, psychiatry, social psychology, marital and family therapy or counselling academics/teachers/lecturers. These introductions are really useful and insightful.